

Being a Fairbury Coal Miner Was a Dangerous Occupation

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John Marsh and his son Henry Marsh discovered coal one mile west of Fairbury in 1862. Their discovery of coal 200 feet below the prairie set off a coal mining boom in Illinois. Within a few years, Fairbury had five different coal mines operating. People flocked to Fairbury to work as coal miners. They came from the Eastern United States and Europe to Fairbury. The Fairbury coal mines operated from 1862 until the last mine closed in 1941.

It is unclear exactly how many total tons of coal were mined from beneath Fairbury. The Fairbury Echoes Museum has a sign which indicates that around three millions tons of coal were mined. Unfortunately, there is no data source for this estimate.

The Illinois State Geological Survey 2012 report reports there was a total of 1.742 million tons of coal mined from Fairbury. Unfortunately, the ISGS only had production data from three of the five Fairbury coal mines.

If the ratio of 1.742 million tons of coal for three mines is applied to five mines, the total coal production from Fairbury would be 2.9 million tons. This is very close to the 3.0 million number posted in the Fairbury Echoes Museum. So, a fair assumption is that about 3.0 million tons of coal were mined from Fairbury between 1862 and 1941.

In the building construction industry, they developed a rule-of-thumb for worker safety. In the 1930s, major building projects experienced one fatality for each \$1 million of project expenditure. This ratio applied to big projects like the Boulder Dam, skyscrapers in New York City, and the Golden Gate Bridge.

The Spring 1994 edition of the SIU magazine titled *Concerning Coal: Tidbits About Coal for Public Consumption*, has an article that has some data on the safety rule-of-thumb used in the coal mining industry. From 1883 until 1917, the rule-of-thumb was one death per every 90,000 tons of coal mined. After 1917, there were some improvements implemented in coal mining. These improvements resulted in a safer rule-of-thumb of one fatality per every 380,000 tons of coal mined.

If the safer rule-of-thumb is applied to the three million tons of coal mined in Fairbury, we should expect to have experienced about eight fatalities in Fairbury coal mines.

In a typical Fairbury coal mine, the main shaft was excavated down to the coal vein located 180 to 200 feet below ground. In this main shaft, two elevator cars operated under steam power. While one car went up, the other car came down.

The coal veins in Fairbury were only about five feet high. The mines used a room and pillar method of mining. Miners drilled holes in the coal vein. Explosives were inserted into the drilled holes and fired to loosen the coal in the vein. The miners propped up the ceiling using wooden posts. They moved the coal chunks into little railroad cars pulled by mules. They left coal pillars to keep the roof from collapsing. The mules pulled the railroad cars to the steam-powered elevators. The elevators transported the coal up to the surface. On the surface, the coal was ground into smaller pieces, and then sold to retail customers.

A fundamental safety review of this type of mine reveals several high-risk areas. Large chunks of coal or rock falling unexpectedly and crushing the miner was the highest risk. Six Fairbury coal miners perished because of coal or rocks falling on them.

The second highest risk was blasting related accidents. Blasts occurring at the wrong time could severely injure the coal miner. Two Fairbury coal miners perished because of blasting related accidents.

Another risk was the small train car derailling and knocking out a wooden roof support pole. Once the pole was moved, the roof collapsed, and the miner was crushed by falling rock. One Fairbury coal miner perished because of a train car derailment.

Another risk was moving elevator cars. One miner perished when he was crushed by a descending elevator car.

Records indicate at least ten coal miners perished in the Fairbury coal mines. This is slightly more than expected using the industry safety averages. There were also many near-miss accidents which injured miners. Coal mining was probably the most dangerous occupation in Fairbury while the coal mines were in operation.



Fairbury coal miners at the Walton Coal Mine.

